Without doubt Honneth’s attempt to reconnect morality and labour through the notion of struggles for recognition represents a major advance over Habermas’s consensus-driven model of communicative action. Nevertheless, by restricting morality to the ‘cultural’ sphere Honneth endorses Habermas’s uncoupling of the economy from the normative content of modernity. Thus, while Honneth is to be congratulated for replacing Marx’s subject-centred account of labour with an intersubjective account, he fails to acknowledge sufficiently the ‘moral’ content of workers’ ‘material’ struggles. To rectify this I propose to view workers’ struggles as attempts to retrieve the intersubjective domain lost beneath the system’s diremption of ‘ethical life’.

Although Habermas and Honneth both claim to have sublated ‘subject-centred thinking’ they leave intact the social mechanisms that sustain it. In Habermas’s case this expresses itself as ‘strategic action’ and in Honneth’s case as ‘utilitarian interests’. In both cases ‘subject-centred thinking’ is associated with the kind of material activities that Marx places under the rubric of ‘metabolic exchange’ (Stoffwechsel). To this extent, critical theory continues to view economic activity as inherently ‘non-normative’. Nevertheless, one cannot escape what Bourdieu calls ‘the ritual either/or choice between objectivism and subjectivism’ (Bourdieu 1977, p. 4), by simply discovering an alternative intersubjective terrain from which to analyse modernity. On the contrary, while notions such as ‘life-world’, ‘value-community’ and Bourdieu’s own ‘habitus’ go some way to identifying an ethically charged form of social solidarity, they remain, for the most part, restricted to the cultural sphere. This is
because in practice the economy dirempts ‘ethical life’ into its objective and subjective components. In which case: (1) any appeal to a purely theoretical resolution to this dichotomy will remain limited in scope; and (2) any attempt to resolve this dichotomy in practice must do so at the expense of the economy’s hegemony of intersubjectivity. It is not, therefore, possible to overcome ‘subject-centred thinking’ (in either its macro- or micro-social forms) without overcoming the social conditions that support it. Namely, the diremption of intersubjectivity ‘up’ into the objective structures of the system and ‘down’ into the subjective preferences of strategic actors.

However, because the ‘objectification’ of sociality is predicated on the system’s ‘subjectification’ of agency, changing the social status of the latter helps bring about a corresponding change in the status of the former. As individuals come together in a collective fashion so the system loses its alien character. What was once the prerogative of market forces comes increasingly to be mediated by social institutions. As a consequence, the system loses some of its ‘non-normative’ appearance in the eyes of participants. However, this process of ‘re-internalization’ cannot be divorced from the economy’s tendency towards instability. Because the system is incapable of securing the conditions for its own possibility, some degree of state regulation is required to protect the economy from its own failures. Thus neoclassical economics considers state intervention legitimate when the market proves incapable of utilizing economic resources efficiently, while welfare economics extends this justification to questions of equity and autonomy – even when they jeopardize efficacy. To this extent, the scope of state intervention is predicated on both the system’s failure to function in an efficacious manner and the labour movement’s success in placing its welfare needs on the political agenda.

Although Habermas accords only a limited role to the welfare state in rendering the economic imperatives of the system accountable to the intersubjectively formulated ends of participants, he remains concerned to ground the legitimacy of administrative power in the democratic procedures of the lifeworld. To this end, he allocates a key role to the law in connecting the weak force of ‘communication action’ to the strong force of economic regulation. However, because the bridge connecting the democratic impulses of the lifeworld to the autopoietic imperatives of the system bypasses the welfare state, Habermas’s version of ‘practical reason’ is too